

Vinala Ramachandran (ed.). *Gender and Social Equity in Primary Education: Hierarchies of Access*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004. 381 pages. Paperback. Indian Rs 390.00.

Education is a basic human right. Over the past sixty years much progress has been made in raising literacy levels across a large cross-section of developing countries. For instance, Pakistan has seen an increase in literacy levels from 15 percent in 1951 to just over 50 percent in 2004. In India also there has been a significant increase in literacy levels. The 2001 Census of India showed that 65.4 percent of the population could be considered to be literate. A breakdown by sex revealed that more males (75.85 percent) were literate than females (54.16 percent).

Although the figures are impressive, much remains to be done in India if literacy levels are to be raised to the levels that prevail in the developed world. Thus, appropriate plans, programmes, and projects need to be implemented to provide basic primary education to all children. However, there are two sides to the picture; one that deals with the demand for education and the other with the supply of education. On the demand side, one of the most important factors is that of income of the parents. On the supply side, it is the quality of education being imparted, particularly the level of teaching standards, and the up-keep of school buildings.

However, quality varies, and so does access, within the educational system. This is what the book deals with. Although, India has progressed remarkably in the area of education, that progress is patchy in parts with particular reference to gender and social equity. One should not forget that education provides the grounds for greater social equity, which echoes in the national educational programmes of all countries of the world, and those of the developing countries in particular.

The book can be read as divided in two parts. Part I, which consists of six articles, reviews the existing information and data about the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) with special reference to the effect that this programme has had on gender and social equity. The three questions asked are: Has the DPEP succeeded in attaining its equity objectives? Has it reduced inequalities across the country? And has the educational system opened up to the inclusion of girls, women, and those less fortunate? The approach followed to find the answers is two-pronged. The first is based on published work, whereas the second is the outcome of a number of qualitative studies carried out in selected districts across the country.

One of the significant outcomes of the research effort is that although overall enrolment rates have increased at the primary level, those children who are disadvantaged in social and economic terms have fared badly. This is further aggravated by class, caste, and gender biases. In other words, children from the lower classes and castes, or of non-dominant gender (girls), have less access to primary-level schooling. Moreover, it is found that children with a similar social or

caste background go to the same schools—the education system is being segregated on the basis of caste and social system. Part of the problem is due to the low income levels of the parents who cannot afford to send their children to the ‘right’ schools.

A similar picture has developed in Pakistan over the past several decades, when the government allowed the establishment of educational institutions in the private sector. These schools tended to be more expensive as well as qualitatively better than government-run institutions. Thus, well-off parents sent their children to such private institutions; those less fortunate had to settle for inefficient, poor-quality education in the public sector. Therefore, a class bias has slowly developed in the Pakistani education system, something which this book highlights as also happening in India. This, then, is an important contribution made in assessing the impact of education policy and programmes with respect to improving the overall literacy levels in India. Numbers are not important but access to the system of education, particularly at the primary level, is all-important if universalisation of primary education is the stated objective. If equal access is guaranteed, then education promotes social equity.

To assist in the promotion of greater social equity, various methods and actions are suggested for improvement. The articles in the book are well-written and accessible to the lay reader. The data presented and discussed in different articles show an India that is progressing on the education front but not without some drawbacks.

The use of boxes and tables help the reader to go through the text more comfortably and understand the issues being raised. To conclude, this book is a pioneering work on a very important topic, that of access to the educational system without any gender or other bias. The lessons learned here would help in devising better educational policies that promote social equity and justice.

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